

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 246 629

EC 162 881

AUTHOR Miller, Denise T.
TITLE Classroom Control through Manual Communication: The Use of Sign Language with Behaviorally Disordered Children.
PUB DATE Apr 84
NOTE 21p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the Council for Exceptional Children (52nd, Washington, DC, April 23-27, 1984).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Information Analyses (070)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Behavior Disorders; *Classroom Techniques; Elementary Education; Finger Spelling; *Sign Language

ABSTRACT

Sign language with verbal behaviorally disordered children is an alternative mode of communication for helping to maintain behavioral control. Also, fingerspelling is used to teach letter-sound association, particularly with vowels. The use of signs in the classroom reduces unnecessary conversation and expands on simple cues and signals most teacher already use. It appears that the kinesthetic value of sign language and fingerspelling assists in the educational process of remediating learning problems. Manual communication increases opportunities for improved self esteem, attention, on-task behavior, communication, and academics. In addition, there is a motivational aspect of curiosity and novelty with the students, enhancing the purpose and results of signing. (Illustrations of signs for direction words, basic concept words, numbers, and "other" words are included). (Author/SW)

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Classroom Control Through Manual Communication:

The Use of Sign Language With Behaviorally Disordered Children

Denise T. Miller

University of South Florida

Running head: CLASSROOM CONTROL THROUGH MANUAL COMMUNICATION

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Abstract

Sign language with verbal behaviorally disordered children is an alternative mode of communication for helping to maintain behavioral control. Also, fingerspelling is used to teach letter-sound association, particularly with vowels. The use of signs in the classroom reduces unnecessary conversation and expands on simple cues and signals most teachers already use. It appears that the kinesthetic value of sign language and fingerspelling assists in the educational process of remediating learning problems. In addition, there is a motivational aspect of curiosity and novelty with the students, enhancing the purpose and results of signing.

Classroom Control Through Manual Communication:

The Use of Sign Language With Behaviorally Disordered Children

Sign language fascinates most people not directly exposed to this type of communication. The hand movements, facial expressions, and body language of the sender and receiver express a great deal of information. The system of signing has broadened the communication desires and lifestyles of many hearing impaired individuals around the world for years. Sign language is now a practice in many school settings to facilitate communication of severely handicapped individuals. The premise for this paper expands on the above in a new and creative light.

Review of the Literature

A literature review reveals no empirical data to support the need for the use of sign language for behavioral control with verbal behaviorally disordered children. Most literature relating classroom control and manual communication centers on language development in autistic children. Professionals in the educational and scientific world expanded on the latter concept in the late 1960's and early 1970's in an attempt to communicate with nonverbal autistic children (Offir, 1976). Much research now centers on the appropriateness and usefulness of sign language with autistic children (Benaroya, Wesley, Ogilvie, Klein, & Clarke, 1979; Bonvillian, Nelson, Rhyne, 1981). The literature does support the use of fingerspelling for academic benefits (Vernon & Coley, 1978; Vernon, Coley & DuBois, 1980), which will be only a portion of the discussion in this paper.

Background

Approximately four years ago I attended two sequential courses in sign language at the local junior college with the prospect of teaching autistic children in mind. The population of students I was teaching at the time, however, consisted of twelve behaviorally disordered youngsters in a self-contained classroom, ages six to ten. An aide was assigned to the class for only half a day, and behavioral control was top priority in order to teach academics in skill groups. In practicing for my weekly sign language class the idea came about to rehearse the fingerspelling and a few signs with my class. I began to notice the words and phrases spoken most often in the classroom. Words like "sit", "stand", and "ignore" predominated the verbal commands. Using the appropriate signs for the commands, I conveyed my directions through manual communication. What started as drill for me became an exciting game for my students and evolved into an extremely functional and effective way to control behavior without words. The novelty aspect produced astounding compliance in the behavior of my students. Their favorable reactions motivated me to continue and expand on this idea in the classroom and to search for support for the concept by reviewing the literature, studying basic principles of learning theory, and communicating with other teachers who achieved similar positive results by using sign language in classrooms for the behaviorally disordered.

My concept of simple sign language in the classroom for behavioral control has evolved into twenty-six words and the twenty-six letters of the alphabet in fingerspelling. The words can be broken into such areas as command words (e.g., sit, stand, ignore), direction words (e.g., look at me, work fast), reinforcing words (e.g., very good, thank you), and basic concept words (e.g., days of the

week, colors). Fingerspelling aids in teaching letter-sound association, particularly with vowels, and spelling words.

I have made numerous presentations of this idea and the accompanying materials at workshops and conferences. Both written and verbal reactions and evaluations of applicability in varying special education classes has been very positive.

Reasons and Advantages

It is my thesis that the use of sign language for behavioral control is valuable for a variety of reasons and advantages. Such supportive concepts as stimulus-response learning, directing attention and eye contact, reduction of verbal stimuli, signal interference, communication skills, and motivation will be explored further.

Functional Utility

All teachers use different cues and signals to get the attention of a student or the class. A major advantage of sign language is in its great functional use in the classroom. A teacher may snap fingers to gain attention many times over, but a direct message can be conveyed with specific signs.

The manual sign not only functions as a global whole, it also can and does derive great expressive force, directness, and unambiguousness from representing what it stands for through indication of its shape or movement, outline, or any other typical characteristic. (Tervoort, 1972, p.357)

The stimulus-response aspect of signing facilitates appropriate behavior which eventually can become part of the child's behavioral repertoire. A perfect example of this is in the word "ignore." That one word, as well as one sign,

has helped diffuse many volatile situations in the classroom. It was amazing for me to see marked transformations in the behavior of my students during irritating situations. Instead of responding to stress with aggressive behaviors, little hands could be seen flapping in front of noses, with little or no facial expression, as the student ignored the inappropriate behavior and stayed on task. The functional utility, therefore, is not only of my communication to my students, but also to themselves and to each other.

The properties of visual and kinesthetic modes support the functional utility. The first centers on the concrete muscle movements of the hand stimulating the tactile-kinesthetic mode of learning. Too often the kinesthetic mode is neglected or forgotten entirely, yet is "endorsed" by learning theory. The second characteristic has been noted by a number of authors (Kontstantareas, Oxman & Webster, 1978; Vernon & Coley, 1978) in that these signs appear iconic, or, in other words, look similar to what they mean. Koegel, Rincover, & Egel (1982) give the example of the sign for banana, which consists of "peeling" the index finger of one hand with the fingers of the other. Iconicity reinforces the visual acquisition and retention of the signs as well as the alphabet through fingerspelling.

One interesting theory mentioned in the literature involves learning as related to the hemispheres of the brain (Krackenberg, 1981; Vernon & Coley, 1978). Vernon and Coley (1978) suggest that the motor-linguistic functioning required for sign language may be located in the hemisphere opposite that for auditory language learning, which is possibly encoded in the left hemisphere.

Communication Skills

Analyzing the basics of communication is important as a foundation for the concept of using simple sign language in the classroom. "Communicative language

is both functional and spontaneous. Such language helps the individual to have an effect on others, to the individual's own advantage" (Koegel, Rincover & Egel, 1982). A child's ability to communicate weaves into almost every other aspect of his behavior and development. Communication, verbal or nonverbal, outlines a two way process with the sender and the receiver. The sender must take into consideration what the receiver already knows and needs to know. Behaviorally "translated", the sign must communicate behavior the student is able to understand and exhibit. Communication can be hindered or supported by the relationship of the speaker or listener. Therefore, the relationship of the teacher to the class is imperative whether communication is verbal or gestural. Body language also strengthens or impairs communicative flow.

Indeed, most children staffed into a behaviorally disordered classroom have the intellect and language ability to survive in society, but sadly lack appropriate communication and social skills. They exhibit proficient expressive skills, but lack emotional maturity with which to interpret messages accurately and respond appropriately. This deficit is reflected in their behavior problems. As much as communication may be emphasized by the teacher, cues and prompts become necessary to assist the child in acquiring more sophisticated language and behavior skills. These skills need be taught in order to facilitate appropriate socialization skills.

Attention

In learning theory, directing attention focuses on two areas. Alerting function is a prerequisite to selective perception which, in turn, encodes to the short term memory. The alerting function initiates attending behaviors, whereas the selective perception distinguishes features of the message to be stored and processed in the short term memory (Gagne, 1977). As much as this

discussion has focused on the use of sign language for behavioral control, secondary emphasis is placed on facilitating academic learning and socialization skills.

Eye contact. Intrusion play has been mentioned as the first step in language training with the autistic child (Benaroya, Wesley, Ogilvie, Klein, & Meaney, 1977). The main emphasis in this concept is the establishment of eye contact. Many of my behaviorally disordered children have learned to avoid the total stress of confrontation and responsibility for their actions by evading the eye contact of the person involved. The sign "look at me" is primary to this concept. The two fingers directed to the teacher's eyes or to another person prompts attending behavior, important to communication. That sign is particularly useful in teaching social skills in a group setting. Signalling a child to attend to the individual speaking is more efficiently achieved with the nonverbal sign. Once a consistent pattern of eye contact is established, students appear to cue in and respond more readily to the visual signs in addition to the verbal message. Also the child appears more self-confident and socially appropriate when looking at the person who is talking.

Body language. Decoding the body language of another person revolves around communication. Children must learn to become aware of, and relate to, messages from body language to get the complete communicative picture. This is not to say that simple signs lead to improved decoding skills in body language, but rather that the child will learn to focus and relate to facial features and body postures associated with tone quality, pitch of voice and meaning of words spoken. By pairing signs with physical expression, transfer of meaning may occur.

Student and Teacher Talk

Hewett (1980) mentions the desirability of reducing the amount of teacher and student talk in a classroom. Since the signs chosen relate words spoken at a high frequency, the above can be attributed as another positive feature. Coincidental is the effort to keep commands short and simple. Most students have been satiated with verbal reprimands and commands in previous educational settings. Many students learn quickly to "screen out" these demands of the adult (Knoblock, 1983) and rather insistently and defiantly continue to display the inappropriate behavior. Expressively, most of these children control or disrupt their environments so the emphasis in using sign language is to reduce the verbal talk. Therefore, when the child enters the therapeutic environment of the behaviorally disordered classroom, signs communicate similar messages without negative overtones and long lectures. Compliance can be improved to a large degree.

One important contrast, therefore, between the use of signs with the nonverbal autistic child and the verbal behaviorally disordered child is the desirability of spoken language. With consistency in signing, the outcome with the behaviorally disordered student should be decreased verbal interaction, whereas the desired result for the autistic child is to facilitate speech and language skills.

Behavior Modification and Sign Language

The use of sign language with autistic and behaviorally disordered children is similar in some ways. In the last fifteen years language and communication training within special education has been strongly influenced by two innovative methods: behavior modification and sign language. Proper application of behavior modification techniques establishes the limits and controls that the children

need. The effectiveness of these techniques has been supported for many years. The lack of research in the use of sign language with behaviorally disordered children is probably due to their more refined language skills, as compared to those of the autistic population. However, the purpose of sign language with these students is not to extend verbal communication but rather to curtail it in specific situations related to behavior management. It should be emphasized at this time that the purpose in using sign language is to help maintain appropriate behavior. It cannot and should not be considered a behavioral system. A very strong behavior modification program was the base of my classroom management approach. Using sign language helped maintain peace and order in my classroom.

Signal Interference

Signal interference relates significantly to this topic. This technique of self control was conceived by Fritz Redl and associates in 1952 and is still relevant today. This term emphasizes cues from the teacher, such as tapping fingers on the desk or a cool stare, that communicate to the child to stop inappropriate behavior. The desired outcome is to redirect the child to acceptable behavior without drawing attention to him. A sign such as "ignore" or "work" can be communicated discretely and quickly by the teacher. The command is devoid of any possible reinforcing tone and is usually paired with an equally neutral facial expression. No reinforcing attention, positive or negative, is therefore communicated to the child, except for the short and quick behavioral cue.

Management of Small and Large Group Settings

When faced with the task of teaching academics, social skills and behavioral techniques to twelve behaviorally disordered children, one begins to worry about

personal sanity and safety. It is no small feat of accomplishment to teach small skill groups and monitor academics and behaviors of other students at the same time. When I began to use the signs, particularly during skill groups, I could feel the reduction of stress and anxiety in myself as I quietly communicated "work", "ignore", "very good" and the like to those working at their desks. The secondary benefit was the continuation of the small group teaching process without disruption.

Large group settings, such as a school assembly or in the cafeteria, impose large scale difficulties in cueing and maintaining appropriate behavior with behaviorally disordered children. Signs such as "sit", "listen", "quiet", and "line-up" communicate simply and swiftly the wishes of the teacher without any verbal interaction.

Motivation, Self-esteem, and Transfer of Learning

A positive side effect of the use of sign language appears to be increased self-esteem in my students. Even when the manual communication becomes accepted routine in our classroom, students from the regular classrooms are fascinated with the signs as they see my youngsters communicating in the lunchroom, out at the bus circle and the physical education class. Many attempts to socialize are initiated out of the inquisitiveness and my students beam as they explain the signs to others. This also facilitates motivation and therefore the transfer of learning to new situations out of the teacher's eyesight and earshot. Transfer of this learning becomes very apparent when the parent of the child describes situations at home where the child signals "look at me" to them or "ignore" to a playmate. Whether it be learning through a social skills group or remembering through the kinesthetic value of a sign, observing and learning of these carry over effects in other situations reinforces the sign language behavior of this teacher.

Fingerspelling and Sound-Symbol Learning

Fingerspelling consists of various hand movements related to the twenty-six letters of the alphabet. Children find this process an amazing game to play, whether it be for simple sounds or for spelling words. For many of my younger students the learning of the various short vowel sounds was an impossible task. The kinesthetic movement, as well as the similarities of the hand positions to the printed letter, assists many children in learning letter-sound association. It should be emphasized at this point that words are read and spelled by related sounds in units, not by letter name. This process corresponds to the "whole word" method in reading.

Vernon, Coley and DuBois (1980) assert that the American Sign Language and the manual alphabet combine all four desirable characteristics of remedial reading techniques. These four characteristics are: (1) multisensory, (2) requiring physical involvement of the student, (3) motivating the learner, and (4) involving the concept of an idiographic language. "The use of fingerspelling and sign language involves the kinesthetic, multimodal, motivating, classical conditioning, and sensory training principles basic to the learning theory involved in high quality reading and language instruction" (Vernon, Coley, & DuBois, 1980, p.300). Most of my students were definitely aided in sound-symbol recognition through the consistent practice of fingerspelling. Whichever reason affected each individual student was not apparent, but the learning itself was observable.

Summary

In summary, sign language in a classroom for behaviorally disordered students, as opposed to a nonverbal or deaf population, serves a divergent logic of purpose. Manual communication decreases verbal interaction and increases opportunities for improved self-esteem, attention, on task behavior, communication, and academics. It is supportive of a structured and consistent behavior management program and its use is supported by concepts in the field of behavior disorders and learning theory, as well as classroom observation.

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DIRECTION WORDS

Classroom Control

16



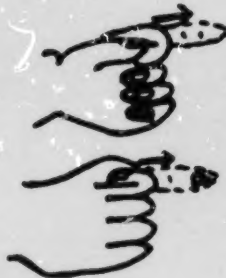
sit



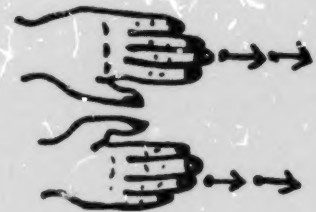
stand



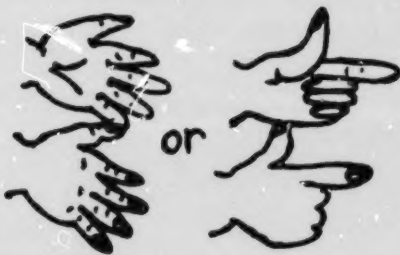
work



fast



walk



line-up



ignore



sing



come

go



now



(wriggle fingers)

wait



look at me



listen



(be) quiet



stop



that



finished



no

yes-shake "s"



try, attempt



please



thank you



very



good



bad

BASIC CONCEPT WORDS



blue - shake "b"
 yellow - shake "y"
 green - shake "g"
 purple - shake "p"

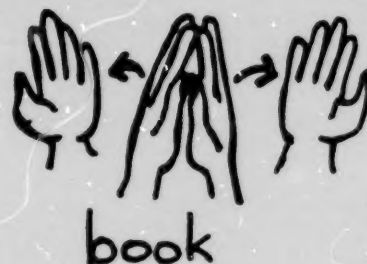
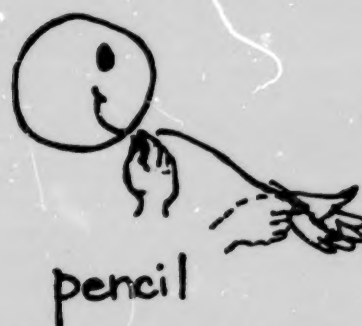


bathroom - shake "t"



Circular motion

Monday	- "M"
Tuesday	- "T"
Wednesday	- "W"
Thursday	- "H"
Friday	- "F"
Saturday	- "S"



NUMBERS

Classroom Control

19



1



2



3



4



5



6



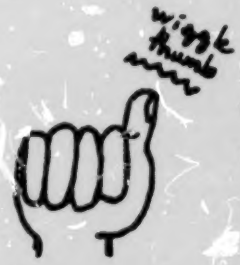
7



8



9



10

"OTHER" WORDS



eat



drink



lunch



I love you

Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the Council for Exceptional
Children (62nd, Washington, DC, April 23-27, 1984)